

# PRESIDENT'S PARK AS SETTING AND SYMBOL

President's Park was created by some of the finest planners and landscape architects in the world, beginning with Pierre L'Enfant and Thomas Jefferson, and including Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.

Pierre L'Enfant established the armature for the park, locating the new "President's House" on a low rise overlooking a series of terraces and gardens that would flow uninterrupted toward the Potomac. The vista was majestic, and with the addition of the Washington Monument and the Jefferson and Lincoln memorials it evolved into one of the world's great symbolic landscapes. No American president can go to sleep without being reminded of his obligations to history.

Thomas Jefferson attempted to make L'Enfant's grand design more democratic by calling for a stone fence around the White House and turning President's Square – now Lafayette Park – into a public space. Within the fence he added serpentine paths, vegetable gardens and hundreds of trees, arranged in soldierly rows around the White House.

In his 1851 plan, Andrew Jackson Downing converted the low marshy area south of the White House into a series of picturesque woods and walkways encircling a broad, flat parade ground. The parade ground became the Ellipse and eventually the grand civic and ceremonial space that we enjoy today.

The 1935 Olmsted Plan, still the guide for all landscape work within the White House fence, reaffirmed L'Enfant's long vistas to the north and south. It was also the first plan to use trees and shrubs for security and privacy, a practice that continues today.

A major goal of the *Comprehensive Design Plan* is to preserve and enhance this design legacy, starting with an update of the



1935 Olmsted Plan. Like the White House itself, the Olmsted Plan has not been renovated for over 50 years. Some historic vistas in Lafayette Park and the Ellipse have been obscured; maintenance procedures are inconsistent; no guide for the future exists. A new comprehensive landscape plan will correct these problems.

Besides providing a magnificent natural setting for the White House, President's Park is also a horticultural sampler in the romantic tradition. "My object is to form a collection of all the trees that will grow in Washington," wrote Downing, "... to form a public museum of living trees and shrubs." Every president since Jefferson has planted commemorative trees and shrubs on the White House grounds. The *Comprehensive Design Plan* calls for continuing this "public museum" tradition, with all culturally significant specimens that have been lost or damaged, such as American elms, replaced with new stock from National Park Service nurseries.

A complementary archaeological survey will identify and inventory the significant sites within the park, which range from prehistoric settlements to the remains of pre-Revolutionary farms and Civil War encampments. This information will be made available to scholars and the public, probably through programs and exhibits at the expanded White House Visitor Center.

The existing monuments and memorials in President's Park will be maintained in a manner appropriate to their important setting, but new ones will be discouraged. Memorials represent the interests of specific groups at specific times, while the White House and President's Park belong to the nation. That is why monuments to individual presidents have not been placed on the grounds, with the exception of a statue of Thomas Jefferson on the north lawn, which was moved to the Capitol during the Grant administration.



Underground additions –  
In the new plan,  
underground garages,  
corridors and meeting  
spaces will make the  
White House work better  
without disturbing the  
historic landscape.

